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Amy A. Hobby
BLS Clearance Officer
Division of Management Systems
Bureau of Labor Statistics, Room 4080
2 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20212

Dear Ms Hobby:

I am writing in support of the proposal to include five important questions about orientations toward the political system on the National Longitudinal Survey. I write both as a political scientist, as a dean of social sciences, and as the chair of the board of overseers of the American National Election Studies, which is collaborating with the NLS on this project. The questions proposed for NLS are key indicators for scholars in many fields in the social sciences, not only in political science but in sociology, psychology, and other fields as well.

The questions proposed for NLS assess important aspects of American's involvement in our system of government. Two measure engagement with politics, either by following what is happening or by turning out to vote. Another asks whether respondents identify with a political party. The last two explore confidence in government and trust in other people. All five are the subject of substantial scholarly research interest. Sizable research literatures explore voter turnout and interest in politics, trust in government and fellow citizens, and the impact – far-reaching – of partisan identification. My own work, which has explored citizen engagement, would be much enhanced by the addition of these questions for NLS. These questions are also, moreover, essential measures of civic health in the United States. Our polity needs its citizens to be willing to get involved in politics, either by voting or simply by paying attention. It needs its citizens to have confidence in each other and in their government. Finally, it needs citizens to be able to understand what happens in elections and government, and we have extensive evidence to suggest that party identification is the primary means by which they do so. These five questions represent key variables for social scientists to study both for intellectual reasons and for civic reasons.

These five questions also represent an important research collaboration between the American National Election Studies and the National Longitudinal Survey, intended to benefit both research communities. They will be funded on the survey by the National Science Foundation, which encouraged ANES to seek out a relationship with NLS, which relationship has already enriched both. The collaboration between ANES and NLS is an interesting model not just for how scholarly projects can cooperate to mutual benefit but how federal agencies can leverage the benefit of their investments through cooperation.

The questions proposed for the survey are well tested, based on decades of experience in polling Americans about their orientations toward politics. The ANES studies date back to 1952, making it the longest-running continuously-operating survey in the social sciences and the most respected study of its kind in the world. The questions are not intrusive. In particular, as extensive research indicates, party identification is separate from vote choice: it is a measure of identification, like ethnicity, and not a measure of preference. It is essential to our understanding of how people think about politics and government. In over 50 years, through a great deal of political controversy, very few people have refused to answer this question, or found it difficult to understand. Should they object for any reason, they will be able to opt not to respond. These questions are part of a module separate from the rest of the questionnaire, introduced with another reminder that respondents can choose not to answer.

I am confident that the addition of these items to the NLS will further enhance a powerful tool for social scientific research and enable still deeper understanding of how Americans relate to their society.

Sincerely yours,



John Mark Hansen
Hutchinson Distinguished Service Professor
Dean of the Social Sciences